

Book Review

Ad van Schaik 2013

KERALA: Een dictionnaire amoureux. reisboek. (Travel Book).

Uitgeverij Aspekt. Amersfoortsestraat 27, 3769 AD Soesterberg, Nederland. Local Copies available from: Rajkumar.K. Tourist Information Officer, Marketing Division- Kerala Tourism, Park View Thiruvananthapuram-33. Paper Back. Illustrated. pp. 185. First Edition 2013. Price: €17,95.



This is the first travel book in the Dutch language on Kerala. The author journalist Ad van Schaik is a very frequent traveler and has been visiting Kerala every year for the past 25 years, writing reports and taking pictures for various news papers and magazines in the Netherlands. "When he visits beautiful or special places he wants the world to know about it". Although "Kerala" is written as a travel book, it is not a book with sightseeing lists. It is a collection of short powerful stories about historical facts and beautiful legends with much interest in the Dutch influences. For his reports writing from Kerala Ad van Schaik received the award for best foreign journalist in 2008, which is now published as his new book.

With its intense green and waterways, Kerala is completely different than the rest of India. For the past few thousand years Kerala, also known as Malabar, has been a source supplier and trading partner for Netherlands but few Dutch people know this. King Solomon bought peacocks, the Romans bought ivory, Arabs pepper and unique medicinal plants from here, that makes Kerala a special part of India. Remnants of spice trade and the presence of the Dutch are still visible in Cochin. The present book loudly announces a new destination for Dutch travelers.

Kerala is an area of potential contrasts. The culture here differs significantly from the rest of India. Because of the ancient matriarchal system which prevailed in Kerala until 19th century, women have a very high respect in the society here than in the rest of India. Almost everyone can read and write. Women are found in all kinds of occupations, from runner to doctor, judges and business professionals. Many surgery sisters, nurses and priests from Kerala work in Europe even today, also in Netherlands. Faith plays an important role in Kerala. Hinduism, Catholicism and in a less degree Islam is represented. Christianity in India is even older than in Netherlands as apostle St. Thomas is believed to have visited Kerala in about 52 A.D. The oldest Christian church in India is located in Kerala.

The book is divided into about 35 brief chapters covering all aspects of life in Kerala including social history, language, religious beliefs, festivals, music and martial arts. Although not accessible to all, the author managed to report some famous Hindu temples like Guruvayoor and the Ayyappa shrine at Sabarimala which are visited by millions of devotees every year. As his native city in Netherlands is founded by Romans, the author is fascinated with the ancient city of Muziris in Kerala with its 4000 years of cultural relationships with Romans and other Europeans.

There are two chapters on ayurveda and ancient ayurvedic medical traditions in Kerala. The spices

and ayurvedic medicinal plants described in *Hortus Malabaricus* authored by Van Rhee and originally published from Amsterdam were important items of trade for many centuries between Kerala and Europe including Netherlands.

India is a difficult country to understand. It is bulky and almost a hundred times larger than the Netherlands. The book opens with a popular, old Indian story about seven blind men who went to encounter an elephant to make a description of it.

The first feels the tail and says an elephant is tall and thin. The second gropes a paw and says an elephant is a pillar. All try an image of this huge animal, but each sees something else for themselves. This is the fascination for Kerala, a land of contradictions. His engaging storytelling style makes the readers like to dream away in another culture. "Kerala" by Ad van Schaik will be a fascinating window to India for Dutch travelers.

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